

## Powerful times

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# **Powerful Times: Flexible Discipline and Schedule Gifts at Work**

**Alex J Wood** University of Oxford

**Corresponding author:** Dr Alex J. Wood, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 1 St Giles, Oxford, Oxfordshire, UK, OX1 3JS, alex.wood@oii.ox.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

This article uses two ethnographic retail case studies to investigate contemporary workplace control. The findings highlight how flexible scheduling has serious consequences for workers and causes insecurity. This provides managers with a powerful and unaccountable mechanism for securing control. Benefits for managers of using flexible scheduling to secure control are shown to be its ambiguity and flexibility. Moreover, flexible scheduling creates an environment where workers must continually strive to maintain managers' favour. Little evidence is found to suggest that this control is aided by work games obscuring workplace relations. Flexible scheduling does, however, enable misrecognition of workplace relations due to the schedule gifts which it entails. Schedule gifts act to bind workers to managers' interests through feelings of gratitude and moral obligation.

## **Key words**

Discipline, flexibility, job insecurity, labour process, scheduling, working time, workplace control

## **Introduction**

Flexible scheduling is an increasingly common employment practice in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). In the US, 28% of workers report having schedules with

variable start and end times (Golden, 2005). A similar situation exists across Europe where around 35% of workers report facing changes in their work schedule (Parent-Thirion et al., 2012). As a consequence, the benefits and drawbacks of flexible scheduling have been widely debated both in academic and policy circles and among the public. These discussions, however, have tended to focus on issues of job quality, work-life balance and well-being (for an overview see: Wood, 2016). The focus of this article is different, drawing attention instead to important but under-researched issues of managerial power and workplace control.

Understanding the manner in which flexible scheduling influences control is critical as control represents an essential element of the employment relationship. The centrality of control derives from the fact that the employment relationship can never be entirely specified in advance. Rather, potential labour power is purchased for x price and y time but the exact details of the work are left vague and open-ended. This means that purchasers of labour power must ensure it is expended in line with their designs. Additionally, while the labour contract is 'indeterminate', the process of capital accumulation simultaneously generates a 'structured antagonism' between capital and labour within the workplace owing to capital accumulation being necessitated upon exploitation (Edwards, 1986).

This article builds upon previous studies which highlight the potential for managers to use flexible scheduling to punish workers. This is referred to as flexible discipline and is a particularly subtle form of power which can be easily modulated. However, this account goes further than previous research by demonstrating that flexible scheduling not only acts as a disciplining mechanism but also simultaneously obscures that domination. An original account of the ways in which 'schedule gifts' mystify workplace relations is developed with reference to Bourdieu's (1977) discussion of Kabyle peasants' gift economy.

The article begins by reviewing the workplace control literature, linking it to

contemporary labour market developments in the US and UK. Particular attention is paid to Burawoy's (1979) influential insight that the realisation of profit requires not only securing control over the labour process but also obscuring workplace relations. However, Burawoy's account of the manner in which workplace relations are obscured by work games has been criticised for being inadequately 'relational' (Mears, 2015). Therefore, an alternative is proposed based upon manager-controlled flexible scheduling. Building upon Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of gift exchange, an original account of how workplace relations can be obscured by 'schedule gifts' is elucidated. It is argued that schedule gifts enable workers to overcome the insecurity inherent in 'manager-controlled flexible scheduling' (Wood, 2016) by meeting their material and social needs. However, the acceptance of schedule gifts obscures flexible scheduling as a source of control. The article uses two ethnographic case studies to investigate the role of manager-controlled flexible scheduling in aiding workplace control. Particular attention is paid to elucidating the obscuring effects of work games and scheduling gifts respectively.

## **Workplace Control**

### *Control in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

The growth of occupations based around the provision of services has been a key feature of recent decades (Kalleberg, 2011). Temporal flexibility is a central component of many low-end service sector jobs and is achieved through 'manager-controlled flexible scheduling' (Henly et al, 2006; Wood, 2016), whereby workplace managers vary 'the number and timing of employees' work hours' (Lambert, 2008: 1207). Wood and Burchell's (2015) analysis of the 2005 and 2010 waves of the European Working Conditions Survey shows that the number of workers experiencing manager-controlled flexible scheduling increased in the UK by 7 percentage points to 24% of the labour force. This equates to around seven million people in

the UK experiencing employer-controlled alterations to their schedules with little notice (Wood and Burchell, 2015). Wood and Burchell's (2015) findings suggest that issues surrounding temporal flexibility in the UK are much wider than the media and policy focus upon zero hour contracts indicates (see also Wood, 2016). In fact, Wood's (2016) findings support the contention of Rubery et al. (2005) that we may be witnessing a new flexible capitalist temporality. Moreover, manager-controlled flexible scheduling has been demonstrated to damage work-life balance (Henly and Lambert, 2014; Kalleberg, 2011; Wood, 2016) and has been suggested to constitute a form of job insecurity (Burchell, 2002; Standing, 1999; De Witte et al., 2010; Wood and Burchell, in press).

In this context of temporal flexibility, what forms does workplace control take? A popular view in the 1990s was that contemporary control was achieved through electronic surveillance technology which enabled the realisation of Foucault's (1977) 'panopticon'. However, such arguments were critically evaluated in, what became known as, the 'call centre debate'. The debate empirically demonstrates that the notion of 'the electronic panopticon' to be overly simplistic: it conceptually overstates the dominance of surveillance and underestimates workers' capacity for resistance (Thompson and van den Broek, 2010).

An obvious alternative is that workplace control is enabled by manager-controlled flexible scheduling. This method of scheduling affords managers a high level of discretionary control over working-time, even enabling real-time adjustments to schedules (Lambert, 2008). However, this control also affords managers significant arbitrary power over workers' work-life balance and the quality of their job (Wood, 2016). This provides managers with a potentially powerful despotic means of ensuring general control. Heyes' (1997) study of a chemical plant, provides evidence of manager-controlled flexible scheduling extending managerial control in this manner. Beynon (1973: 146) demonstrates how, at Ford,

supervisors' control over the allocation of overtime led to workers being 'in the supervisors' pocket. If he doesn't behave, or if the supervisor just doesn't happen to "like" him, he can lose his overtime for a week or forever.' More recently Gottfried (1992) and Chun (2001) found similar mechanisms in the temporary help and micro-chip assembly industries, as did Price (2016) in the Australian retail sector.

However, the suggestion that workplace control can be maintained simply through the disciplining effects of manager-controlled flexible scheduling supposes a one-dimensional view of control. Granovetter (2005) builds on Weber's ([1922] 1978) insights regarding the high costs of maintaining control through coercion. Granovetter argues that when a complex division labour exists, surveillance and, thus, punishment is actually difficult and costly to undertake. Therefore, systems of control tend to be based upon the legitimisation of workplace relations and the production of consent through social group dynamics. As Burawoy (1979) demonstrates, control is maintained not only by managers actively securing it but because workplace relations are simultaneously obscured. In other words, if workers recognised that they were being exploited, they would resist that exploitation.

Burawoy's (1979) investigation of workplace games is perhaps the most influential example of how consent is generated out of group interaction. In his classic ethnographic study of a Chicago machine shop, Burawoy details the obscuring of exploitation through the 'game of making out'. In playing this game, workers attempt to reach a piece rate which maximises their earnings without causing management to re-rate the job to make the rate harder to achieve. Workers initially enter into work games in order to counter the weariness, tedium and arduousness of meaningless work and to make time pass quickly. Although workers initiate these games independently, Burawoy highlights how managers play an important role in determining their sustainability by ensuring sufficient certainty within the

workplace that workers can become engrossed by such games without fear of sanctions.

Group dynamics, in the form of social pressure, are shown to provide an essential incentive to play 'the same game with more or less the same rules' (Burawoy, 2012: 193). Scores were collectively tracked and formed a major topic of workplace discussion. The continual peer-to-peer evaluation of how well each other is playing the game made it difficult to opt out without being ostracised. Thus, the work game was constituted by socially sanctioned and enforced rules meaning that 'making out' became an end in itself beyond that of making more money (Burawoy, 1979).

Playing the 'game of making out' not only involves working hard to produce goods for the firm but, in doing so, workers simultaneously produce their own consent to the prevailing workplace relations. As Burawoy (2012: 7-8) put it, 'the very act of playing the game simultaneously produce[s] consent to its rules. You can't be serious about playing a game... if, at the same time, you question its rules and goals.' Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of work games. Burawoy (1979) cites Donald Roy, as finding work games in the same machine shop 30 years earlier. Roy (1959) also details a work game in his study of a garment factory, involving cutting certain quantities of particular colours and shapes. Durand and Stewart (1998) describe a quite different work game in a Japanese-style plant, in which workers feign transparency and openness with regards to their work practices and skills while secretly seeking to hide their true knowledge and skills from management. Pollert (1981) demonstrates how work games can be almost entirely based around group dynamics, as opposed to the labour process which other researchers focused upon. Pollert (1981) uncovers a highly absorbing sexualised work game in which female tobacco operatives flirt, tease and poke fun at male supervisors. This game 'was a complex, tense balance between confrontation and collaboration... [With] failure in the game lead[ing] to the sanction of being more likely to receive arbitrary victimisation' (Pollert, 1981: 141-144).

More recently, work games have also been highlighted in service sector research. Leidner (1993) demonstrates the importance of sales games for fast food workers. Sallaz (2009; 2015) elucidates a ‘tipping game’ among Las Vegas casino dealers and a ‘learning game’ among call centre workers. Given the importance of flexible working time in contemporary service sector workplaces, we might expect work games, structured around time, to play an important role in maintaining control. Such time-based work games have been uncovered by Beynon (1973); Heyes (1997) and Peng (2011), albeit not in the service sector. Beynon (1973: 118) describes how workers ‘worked back the line’ to ‘make their own time’ in which they could rest and interact socially.<sup>2</sup> Heyes (1997) details temporal work games in which workers make strategic use of absences in order to make gains in overtime. Peng (2011) highlights how Chinese textile workers engage in a game centred on gaining leisure time by achieving their work tasks quickly.

However, Mears (2015) has argued the need to go beyond work games and what she calls the ‘situational construction of consent’, and instead place even greater emphasis upon the relational nature of control. Mears (2015: 1101) highlights the manner in which ‘meanings of work are also shaped through relationships and social ties beyond the accomplishment of work activities.’ In particular, she draws on Mauss’ ([1954] 2002) seminal work on gifts to elucidate the power of gifts in the exploitation of ‘girls’ in VIP nightclubs. For example, by providing a ‘free’ expensive dinner, promoters created an obligation that women both attend and stay at a particular nightclub.

Mauss ([1954] 2002) famously argued that there was no such thing as a free or pure gift; he showed how in reality, all gifts come with the obligation of reciprocation and thus act to strengthen bonds of social solidarity. For Mauss, the expectations created by the exchange of gifts are largely recognised by both parties. Bourdieu (1977) develops Mauss’ argument by



demonstrating that the power relations underpinning gifts are, in fact, often misrecognised by both the giver and receiver. The true power of gifts, Bourdieu (1977) argues, lies not in their reciprocation but in the inability of the less powerful party to fully reciprocate. Bourdieu (1977) illustrates this process through the giving of gifts amongst Kabyle peasants in northern Algeria. He shows how the provision of gifts, which cannot be reciprocated, binds the receiver to give through emotional debt and a sense of moral obligation, while shrouding the act as a gesture of generosity. Such gift-based power relations are especially prevalent when developed institutions which maintain domination in other forms are absent (Bourdieu, 1990). Misrecognition is the foundation upon which the power of gifts rests, and is also central to understanding workplace relations (Bourdieu, 2000). In a similar fashion to Burawoy (1979), Bourdieu (2000) argues that a necessary condition for the existence of labour is workers' subjective misrecognition of their objective exploitation (Burawoy, 2012).

In the context of manager-controlled flexible scheduling, it is possible that managers might provide workers with, what I term, 'schedule gifts.' The giving of additional hours helps provide for workers' material needs, as more hours directly increase hourly-paid workers' wages. Additionally, benevolent alterations to schedules can help provide for workers' social needs by enabling work-life balance (Henley and Lambert, 2014; Smith and Elliot, 2010). These gifts thus enable the overcoming of schedule insecurity. However, by accepting schedule gifts, flexible discipline as a mechanism of control is obscured. Support for the concept of schedule gifts can be found in a study of care workers by Rubery et al. (2015). These researchers find high levels of gratitude are generated by managers' attempts to improve workers' schedules.

## **Method and Cases**

A multiple case cross-national ethnographic approach was followed and the retail sector chosen as an exemplar of low-end service sector employment. One employer being in the UK, referred to as ShopPLC, and one in the US, referred to as RetailCorp. These firms were selected as they shared similar profiles in terms of their domestic market position, yet seemingly contrasting workplace regimes. ShopPLC appeared closer to Burawoy's (1979) archetypical hegemonic regime with a recognised trade union, collective bargaining and a fairly stable and harmonious industrial relations climate. Contrastingly, RetailCorp seemed to represent a more despotic regime being famed for its hostility towards, avoidance of, and conflict with unions, along with its low pay and poor benefits.

These two firms are representative of more general differences in the UK and US employment systems. The strength of private sector unions in the UK has drastically declined over the past 30 years, nevertheless, they remain significantly stronger than their US counterparts. The UK also features greater statutory labour rights and protections, an important case in point being the prevalence of 'at-will employment' in the US. Accordingly, in the US most employees can be dismissed for any reason and without just cause or notice. Likewise, most US workers are scheduled at-will: the quantity and timing of scheduling being entirely at the discretion of management. In effect, the majority of low-end employees in the US are employed on a zero hours basis (Kalleberg, 2011) whereas this remains fairly uncommon in the UK and was not utilised at ShopPLC.

Given the greater labour protections and potential for collective voice, it might be expected that workers in the UK would have greater control over flexible scheduling. However, Wood (2016) demonstrates that even when workplace institutions exist which ostensibly facilitate collective voice and worker-controlled flexible scheduling, the ability of workers to actually influence their scheduling is ultimately dependent upon bargaining power. The research was undertaken at a time of abnormally high unemployment,

underemployment and employment insecurity in both the UK and US which weakened workers' bargaining power. Therefore, despite the contextual differences outlined above, manager-controlled flexible scheduling was prevalent at both. As a consequence, workers' schedules varied widely in number and timing at both companies. At the US case, manager-controlled flexible scheduling was achieved through the direct scheduling of workers on a three-week basis, equivalent to zero hours employment. More complex mechanisms operated at the UK case, yet manager-controlled flexible scheduling was similarly prevalent (see Wood (2016) for an in-depth discussion).

The US fieldwork was carried out in California –in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas. Data collection at RetailCorp involved two intensive observational fieldwork trips totalling six weeks. Documentary data, such as the staff policy handbook, staff magazine, were also collected. This experiential, observational and documentary data was supported by 42 semi-structured interviews with 33 informants consisting of: 24 non-managerial hourly-paid employees (four of whom had recently left RetailCorp); one recently terminated salaried assistant manager; seven union organisers; and one senior union official (conducted over Skype as he was based in Washington D.C).

The UK fieldwork was conducted over a longer period between June 2012 and June 2013 in London. Interviews were conducted with 19 workers at four ShopPLC hypermarkets. All but one of these workers were union members and nine were workplace trade union representatives (union reps). Observation was undertaken at two of these hypermarkets and two additional stores. Interviews were also undertaken with 10 union reps, each from a different store. Additionally, six regional union officials were interviewed and notes taken from meetings with two senior members of the union leadership. In total 39 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 35 ShopPLC informants.

Towards the end of the research, an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the lived experience of work at ShopPLC presented itself. Such experiential knowledge has proved invaluable for understanding the nature of workplace control. Therefore, two months of participant observation at the Mulling Point hypermarket (a pseudonym) in North London were undertaken. The Mulling Point store had a workforce of approximately 200 employees. This participant observation involved working 8.5 contracted hours per week as a shelf-stacker. Work issues were also discussed with colleagues in the canteen before the shifts began and during the train commute to work. To complement the interviews and observational data, a union official also provided copies of the official guides to 'flexible contracts' and 'labour matching' and the collective agreement.

Institutional gatekeepers, in the form of unions and a manager, played an important role in gaining access to the cases. Unfortunately, the use of union gatekeepers meant it was not possible to achieve saturation of managers' views. This is a limitation of the study but not a fatal one; the principle interest was workers' experiences and perceptions of control.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Flexible discipline*

As suggested by Burchell (2002), De Witte (2010), Standing (1999), and Wood and Burchell (in press), manager-controlled flexible scheduling led to widespread experiences of insecurity. As Rachel (worker, RetailCorp) explained:

'You are just wondering like oh my God are they going to change my hours, are they going to cut my hours next week, am I going to have enough money for my rent next week?'

Managers were free to cause distress to specific workers simply by altering their schedule to unsocial hours or to times which clashed with childcare, social activities, education or a

second job. Alternatively, managers could cut the number of hours a worker received, thus reducing their income, or they could increase working time instability and unpredictability. As suggested by Heyes (1997), managers not only had control over workers while they were in the workplace but also wielded significant influence over workers' home lives too, as Francisco (worker, RetailCorp) explained:

'If they change your time, every time that you go to work and they change your day off that means that they own your life already because they let you work any time they want, any day they want and you know you can't even plan for your life.'

The extension of this power beyond the realm of the workplace led another RetailCorp worker, Brad, to equate manager-controlled flexible scheduling to slavery:

'I would compare it almost to feeling like a slave because your power to control your own life is taken from you; they are going to make you [work] whenever... they want...it essentially makes you feel like at any point you can be pulled away from your family and your life to do what your boss wants you to do... You can't plan anything... It affects you whether you're single, married with kids whatever because it does just take all the organisation out of your life.'

Not only did manager-controlled flexible scheduling provide managers with discretionary power over workers' lives, but some employees in both workforces believed managers used it to punish workers if they were not flexible, productive or obedient enough. This created fear amongst workers: if they displeased their managers, their hours would be cut or schedules altered. Akira (former worker, RetailCorp) elaborated on this common theme:

'You're disciplined like a child, like you would punish your 12-year-old "I'm going to take your hours, I'm gonna take your days because you spoke back."'

Likewise, Tony (ShopPLC, union official) commented:

“If I challenge [managers]... I might not get the overtime... or might not get my Sundays, or the hours I'm doing at the moment are perfect I can finish at two, I can go home and pick up the kids... if I make a fuss I might have that taken away or I'll have my hours changed, so if I keep my head down and do as I'm told I'll keep those hours.”

### *The subtlety of flexible discipline*

Flexible scheduling is instigated for cost containment rather than control (Lambert, 2008). Nevertheless, it does place a large amount of power in the hands of managers who can potentially use their discretion to cause significant suffering to specific workers. Managers can in effect discipline workers without recourse to formal disciplinary mechanisms, and thus it represents a radical extension of the power of managers. In reality, how frequently managers took advantage of this situation is impossible to infer conclusively from the data available, but the informants certainly perceived that they did, and, with regard to control, it is this perception which matters.

For their part, managers pleaded innocence, informing workers that they had no choice but to alter schedules due to staffing needs set by head office and based upon projected sales. Although workers frequently disbelieved this, it does point to the inherent ambiguity involved in securing control via scheduling - a major advantage for management. For example, a worker's schedule may, over a number of years, be fairly stable until they do something which displeases management; then they can suddenly find that their working time becomes highly unstable and unpredictable. In this situation, it seems highly plausible to the worker that they are being disciplined. However, it is not easy for them to resist; the change could be a coincidental result of alterations to projected sales by head office which their manager is simply responding to. When the majority of workers experience some degree of

instability in their hours, it is even harder to establish whether such alterations were acts of discipline. Consequently, it was almost impossible for workers to know whether to blame their manager or the whims of market forces. Flexible discipline, therefore, emerges as an ambiguous form of control and one that is less damaging to the 'psychological contract' than threats of dismissal. Colin, a worker at ShopPLC, illustrated this particularly clearly. He stated that, despite being very distressed that his job had been changed to nights, he did not blame management:

'I do understand they need [to meet] certain [customer] demand and obviously, I'm just the unlucky one that mine happened to go to nights.'

At RetailCorp, the subtlety of this manner of control proved especially useful for surreptitiously disciplining workers who joined the worker association, and many workers felt this was a barrier to the growth of the association. Kim (worker, RetailCorp) explained why:

'If I go to an event [organised by the worker association] and I'm out there and they [managers] find out, I will find out the next week over that I've been slashed 10 hours or so and my hours would have been steady at 32 hours for like a couple of months and then all of sudden an activity comes about and my hours get slashed.'

As one of the union's lead organisers explained, it was very difficult to combat this form of punishment:

'It's hard to distinguish if it is complete retaliation or if it is just what RetailCorp usually does... their schedule is X, then they do something publicly and their schedule changes... they are probably trying to mess with you because they know that you can't work that shift... but that's not something that you can necessarily prove... coz then we'd

have to make the argument that their hours have never changed before and that's not the nature of retail.' - Valentina (union organiser, RetailCorp).

Moreover, dismissing someone is rigid in its immutability. Conversely, to cut or alter a worker's schedule can easily be rescinded, making it a much more flexible means of discipline. This flexibility also means that the punishment can be modulated and reduced over time unlike the binary nature of dismissal / non-dismissal.

### *The absence of work games*

If the workplaces were being secured via flexible discipline, that is alterations to schedules, how were workplace relations obscured? Given the large body of literature stressing the role of work games, it was expected that they would be evident at ShopPLC and RetailCorp. In fact, Leidner (1993) and Sallaz (2015) provided evidence for the importance of the obscuring effects of work games in similar service sector settings (fast food restaurants and call centres, respectively). Moreover, considering the importance of temporal flexibility, it was expected that work games might involve time, in a similar fashion as those identified by Beynon (1973), Heyes (1997), and Peng (2011). Yet at RetailCorp and ShopPLC, such games were surprisingly absent.

Leidner (1993) demonstrates the importance of incentives, such as bonuses or even symbolic prizes such as music albums etc., for the constitution of work games. One explanation for the absence of work games is that neither RetailCorp nor ShopPLC incentivised them. For example, at RetailCorp, informants explained how they tried to constitute their work as a race, regarding either their scan rate when operating the check-outs or the speed at which they could empty their pallets of goods when restocking shelves. They even occasionally discussed their scores and strategies with their co-workers. However, these attempts to create games were undermined by managers. For example, pins which were



supposed to be given to check-out workers who achieved fast scan rates, and would thereby enable them to keep score, were not given out. In another instance, managers told workers that the number of pallets of goods they put out was unimportant, as the amount of stock on each pallet varied. Thus, the basis of the game was again undermined as workers were once more deprived of a means of keeping score. Moreover, contrary to Sallaz's (2015) findings, workers at ShopPLC and RetailCorp did not have to struggle to become competent at customer interaction nor did they experience intense social pressure to improve this area of their work. Consequently, there was no basis for 'learning games.'

### *Schedule gifts*

Flexible scheduling, however, was not just a tool which managers could utilise as and when needed in order to punish specific workers. It also constituted an active and constant structuration of the workplace environment so that all workers needed to constantly strive to maintain the favour of managers. As Brad at RetailCorp put it:

'Pretty much everyone feels that if you are on the good side of a manager they will give you more hours, give you better shifts.'

At ShopPLC, workers were afraid that if they displeased their manager their schedules would suffer. Derek (union rep, ShopPLC) explained that:

'They are terrified of not getting any more shifts and being stuck with this three-and-a-half or seven hours a week, which they've gotta live on... Being desperate for some extra hours, they depend on the mood of the manager for their income... once your face doesn't fit you don't get any more hours.'

Managers had the capacity to give workers they liked more hours (including full-time status), the shifts which they desired and greater schedule stability, albeit within the

constraints of staffing needs and their labour budget. Moreover, scheduling was a zero-sum game: any benefits which one worker gained were at the expense of others who, as a consequence, would either receive fewer, less stable or less desirable hours. Unsurprisingly, scheduling was perceived as operating according to favouritism. Therefore, workers tried to gain favour with their manager, in some cases by boosting their productivity by undertaking extra tasks or working off-the-clock. For example, I observed at Mulling Point how Denise, a worker who often received overtime, tended to start work 15 minutes early and continued working after her shift had finished. At RetailCorp, Gabriella explicitly stated that the logic behind extra work effort was to try and gain the favour of managers so that they would help with the worker's scheduling:

‘Sometimes we think that in doing our work they are gonna make it better, they are gonna make it up to us if they see us working hard.’

Working hard, or doing extra tasks to gain a manager’s favour in the hope of assistance with scheduling, was something which José, a RetailCorp union organiser, also claimed was common amongst the workers he spoke to:

‘Some workers do try and do that [gain a manager’s favour by doing extra tasks]. I spoke to someone the other day who was like: “When I first started I used to do a lot of extra stuff for RetailCorp and the time came for them to cut hours and I went to the manager who I’d done all this extra stuff for.”’

Nicola, a former assistant manager at RetailCorp, supported the workers' view that managers at RetailCorp used their control over schedules as a way to secure high productivity:

‘If they are part-time and they have performance issues, I know that managers would look at giving that person less hours than a worker that performed better.’

The process of gaining favour also personalised this mechanism of control which had important implications for the obscuring of workplace relations. Leonardo, a worker at RetailCorp, explained that if workers did not plead to managers they would not get enough hours. A more detailed account of this common experience was provided by another RetailCorp worker, Joe:

‘Before they used to cut my hours but now I can go to a manager... there are times they’ve scheduled me for 16 hours, and I went to her and she fixed them.’

Vincent, a RetailCorp worker, provides an illustrative example of the level of desperation which this pleading could amount to:

‘I’m always constantly asking for a full-time position... I’ve told my store manager “it’s literally getting hard for me to put food on my table and pay my bills, can I get a full-time position?”’

The requirement for workers to go to their manager and ask them for help personalised the scheduling experience. Without this personalisation, the scheduling experience would have consisted of little more than the worker collecting a printout of their schedule which had been calculated according to predictions of demand and drawn up a thousand miles away in the head office. Therefore, when managers acceded to workers’ requests and accommodated their needs, it appeared as a personal act of kindness. As Gabriella explained:

‘It’s just temporary fixes, but then the person feels so grateful that the manager has given them the hours. But next week you have to worry again.’

This kindness, however, could not be repaid directly and thus had the potential to create an emotional debt.

'Sure I have [felt grateful]... not [to] management in particular... but when a particular manager says, you know, "sit down, let's take a look at your schedule and see what we can do" then I'm grateful to that guy or gal.' (Seb, worker RetailCorp)

Moreover, managers' acts of kindness could only ever be 'temporary fixes' owing to the need to schedule workers flexibly to meet demand. Accordingly, the workers' gratitude could be regenerated on a weekly basis.

Investigating the misrecognition of this process required more experiential and textured observation of interactions in the workplace. This was made possible through participant observation of working at ShopPLC. While working as a shelf stacker at the Mulling Point hypermarket it was observed that managers would encourage workers to beg them for additional hours, making vague promises that more hours were available or soon would be. For example, one manager claimed:

"I always have some overtime so let me know if you want any" - this was despite my entire work team being employed on less than nine hours a week and all desiring more hours and, in some cases, to be made full-time' (Fieldnotes, ShopPLC).

Such claims created an expectation among workers that more hours would be available to them if and when they wanted them. For example, one of my co-workers claimed that he had only taken the job based on the assumption that he would be getting more hours. Another poignant example is provided by Jackie:

'It's strange because you speak to the staff and they say their department is short [of staff] but when you ask the manager they say "there isn't any at the moment but keep putting your name down for overtime." I'm just getting a few hours here and there.'

Similar expectations were created more generally at ShopPLC as Bryah, a union rep at

another store, explained:

‘The way they say it is that “we employ you for 10 hours but you may get 25 hours a week” - you may - it may not always happen.’

In order to explore the effect of the capricious environment created by these vague promises of more hours, it is instructive to compare my own experience with that of my closest colleague Rio. Despite my best efforts not to work overly hard and to be considered an average worker, I was, nevertheless, a favourite. Favouritism manifested itself in the fact that, like other favourites, I was routinely offered additional hours while Rio was not. Rio was desperate for additional hours and had told our manager during his interview that the core hours on which he was hired were insufficient for him to make-ends-meet. In fact, he claimed to have explicitly told the manager not take him on unless ShopPLC could provide him with additional hours. Moreover, managers allowed me to rearrange my schedule even when this broke company policy. For my part, my personal commitment to not working hard was undermined by the realities of being a favourite in a workplace practising manager-controlled flexible scheduling. To take one example: I was scheduled to work on both Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve at a time when it was company policy that no-one be granted leave on either of these days. This was a major problem as I needed to travel on Christmas Eve to be with my family on Christmas Day. I had also booked a holiday over the New Year before being employed by ShopPLC. However, when I brought these problems up with my manager, he casually replied that it was 'no problem' to change my hours on Christmas Eve and to take New Year's Eve off. Moreover, he appeared genuinely concerned by my predicament. When this manager then came to check on my progress with the work tasks (which he had personally set me), I felt guilt that I had not achieved what he had asked of me. I found myself feeling an emotional debt to him and a moral obligation to increase my

work effort.

What this example demonstrates is the manner in which scheduling gifts obscure the role of manager-controlled flexible scheduling in securing control. I felt gratitude to the manager and identified with his interests (the completion of the work tasks which he oversaw). Thus manager-controlled flexible scheduling is not only a mechanism which forces workers to accede to managers' wishes but also actively integrates workers into achieving managerial aims. It binds workers to work hard for their manager through a sense of gratitude and obligation to repay them for their 'kindness.' Even with a sociological understanding of the exploitative nature of labour processes and my commitment as a researcher not to work hard, the work no longer appeared to me as labour, but rather as a moral obligation to my manager due to his acts of 'kindness'. Under such conditions, employment is not experienced as simply the impersonal exchange of X money for Y labour, but rather relationally as the need to repay, what appear to be, managers' acts of compassion, caring and friendship.

Manager-controlled flexible scheduling was thus a powerful yet subtle mechanism of control at both RetailCorp and ShopPLC; securing control by extending arbitrary managerial power and obscuring that control through misrecognition of workplace relations. Bourdieu (1977) found that the economic relations (gifts) of Kabyle peasants simultaneously obscured the domination of that very same economic system. Likewise, at ShopPLC and RetailCorp, manager-controlled flexible scheduling not only secured control of the workplace but also obscured its role as a source of control.

The argument above does not, however, rest upon an assumption that managers purposefully manipulate workers through scheduling gifts. They could just as well bestow these gifts out of genuine concern and a desire to help. However, in doing so, the role of flexible scheduling as a mechanism of control is often obscured from them too. In fact,

Bourdieu (1977) argues that gift exchange requires that the dominator deceives themselves just as much as the dominated. The present article focuses on the experiences of workers for pragmatic methodological reasons, therefore, it is unable to cast much light upon managerial perceptions of their actions, although this is an important avenue for future research.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it must be noted that the findings reported above have, due to space limitations, necessarily focused upon control but this should not be taken as evidence that control was total and resistance absent. Future research will highlight the contradictions and limits to this control, highlighting both hidden and overt resistance to it.

## **Conclusions**

Flexible scheduling has been highlighted by a number of researchers as providing managers with a means to secure control in a variety of work settings (Beynon, 1973; Chun, 2001; Gottfried, 1992; Heyes, 1997; Price, 2016). This article demonstrates the manner in which ‘flexible discipline’ significantly increases the discretionary power of managers. Enabling managers to flexibly discipline workers outside of formal procedures by causing significant distress to specific workers through the altering of schedules. These alterations force workers to work at times which clash with their home life, and reduces their income and ability to plan. A major strength of flexible discipline as a mechanism workplace control is its subtlety and ambiguity. With it being hard for workers to discern whether they are actually being disciplined and, as a result, whether the blame for their suffering lies with their manager or the omnipotent workings of the market. This ambiguity reduces the damage to psychological contracts and makes it easier for managers to rescind punishment. Flexible discipline, therefore, represents a more nuanced means of securing control than traditional disciplinary methods, offering managers the possibility to modulate and adjust the severity of punishment.

However, to focus only on discipline and coercion would entail a one-dimensional view of control (Burawoy, 1979; 2012; Granovetter, 2005; Weber [1922] 1978). When a complex division of labour exists, surveillance and, thus discipline, become difficult and costly. Therefore, workplace control tends also to require legitimisation and the creation of consent (Burawoy, 1979; 2012; Granovetter, 2005). Following Burawoy's (1979) classic study, much of the extant literature assumes the legitimisation of control necessitates the obscuring of workplace relations through the playing of 'work games' (Burawoy, 1979; Durand and Stewart, 1998; Heyes 1997; Leidner, 1993; Peng, 2011; Pollert, 1981; Sallaz, 2009; 2015). Despite the expectation that work games, potentially based around the flexible nature of working time, would play an important role in aiding workplace control, this study found little evidence to support this assumption. In fact, the focus on work games has been criticised by Mears (2015) who argues for the need to go beyond 'situational construction of consent' and instead place even greater emphasis upon the relational nature of control.

This article builds upon Mears (2015) to elucidate the potential of gifts to act as an alternative control mechanism to work games. Flexible scheduling does not simply constitute a disciplinary tool as suggested by previous studies (see for example: Chun, 2001; Gottfried, 1992; Price, 2016). It also simultaneously obscures workplace relations by enabling the giving and receiving of 'schedule gifts'. Work environments which entail high levels of manager-controlled flexible scheduling necessitate that workers actively and constantly beg managers for schedules to be altered and more hours granted. The acquiescence by managers to a particular worker's needs is 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu, 1977) by the worker as an act of kindness which they are unable to reciprocate. The inability of the worker to reciprocate the schedule gift binds them to the manager through an emotional debt and sense of moral obligation, while shrouding the manager's act as a gesture of generosity and kindness. Consequently, this article makes an important theoretical contribution to our understanding of



workplace relations by elucidating the manner in which manager-controlled flexible scheduling simultaneously secures and obscures control in the temporally flexible workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Flexible discipline and schedule gifts have an applicability to a wide range of contemporary low-end workplaces. Despite the focus upon zero hours contracts as a particularly despotic and exploitative form of flexibility, this article demonstrates that this can also be true of wider flexible scheduling practices. ShopPLC and RetailCorp were selected specifically because they appeared to represent contrasting workplace regimes. The fact that manager-controlled flexible scheduling was central to control at both adds further weight to the proposition that the control function of flexible scheduling may be widespread. However, further research is necessary to understand how general the findings are beyond the specific spatial and temporal contexts from which they were derived – low-end retail employment in three global cities during a period of labour market crisis. Additionally, research is needed to shed light upon the degree to which managers are aware of this control function of flexible scheduling, and whether it is a deliberate management strategy. It is important to stress, however, that the theory developed by this article is not dependent on control being a deliberate conscious strategy on behalf of managers. Indeed, it is held that this is improbable.

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## **Notes**

1. I am indebted to Huw Beynon for pointing out this finding of his research to me.
2. The account provided by Smith and Elliot (2010) suggests that schedule gifts result from genuine attempts by managers to help workers reconcile life-work conflict and managers are oblivious to this control function. This account supports Bourdieu's (1977) assertion that the exchange of gifts leaves the dominator just as deceived as the dominated.

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### **Author Biography**

Alex J Wood is a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK. His research focuses on the changing nature of labour relations and labour markets. He is currently researching how online gig work is transforming labour relations. His previous research focused on the changing nature of flexible and insecure forms of work such as zero-hour contracts in the UK and USA. He also has a long-standing interest in the relationships between industrial relations, union renewal and emerging forms of workplace representation and patterns of inequality and class. His research has appeared in Human Relations and Industrial Relations Journal.